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SOLANDARIAN
GAME**
AN ENTHEOGENIC EVOLUTION
PSY-FI NOVEL

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By Martin W. Ball

©2016

Kyandara Publishing
Ashland, Oregon



ISBN-13:
978-1522775805

ISBN-10:
1522775803

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This is a work of fiction and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental – except for Moxi, the dog – she's totally real.

Dedicated to all the Toadsters of the world . . .

Endorsements for *The Solandarian Game*:

"A multifaceted and entertaining story that combines the best aspects of Sci-Fi, social commentary, philosophy, and the nature of what it is to be human. Ball eloquently illustrates the entheogenic experience in ways that few others have been able to accomplish, all while envisioning what our future could look like if informed by its insights. He picks up where Aldous Huxley left off with *The Island*, and brings the Psy-Fi genre to the next level."

- Ashley Booth, founder, *The Aware Project: Rethinking Psychedelics*

"*The Solandarian Game* reads like Frank Herbert smoked 5MEO-DMT crossed with Planet of the Toads. Which is a good thing, an extremely good thing. Martin W. Ball has turned science fiction on its head by incorporating his deep insights and realizations about the nature of reality gleaned from his entheogenic experiences into this classic Sci-Fi novel that explores the concept of unity consciousness knowing itself, and playing the game with no end. Autonomous avatars, intergalactic Burning Man, AI-Gods, psychedelic religions of the future and the Temple of the Mystic Toad – take a rollercoaster ride into consciousness itself as this next generation of Psyence Fiction takes flight."

- Rak Razam, writer/producer, *Aya: Awakenings*

"Put on your seat belts and keep your hands and arms inside the spacecraft at all times!!! As if Martin Ball hadn't taken us all far enough into the heights, depths and breadths of the Entheological Paradigm, his new Psy-Fi novel, *The Solandarian Game*, sends us careening across the universe on a psychedelic warp-speed journey into the boundless beyond of cosmic consciousness itself; where we are invited to explore the unfathomed realms of Artificial Intelligence deities, sovereign avatars, and their experiments in seeding solar systems and galaxies with human populations. This action-packed, suspense filled piece of fiction is clearly based firmly on the foundations of true entheogenic experience and within its intergalactic pages offers us a deeper meaning of what it is to be both truly human and Divine. A *must-read* for psycho-nautical navigators and entheogenic explorers alike. You're in for quite a ride!!!"

- Hal Lucius Nation, Grand Hierophant of the *Temple of Awakening Divinity*

"From reality to imagination, the facts are undeniable: Martin Ball's new novel, *The Solandarian Game*, is a journey into the mind and soul of inner truth, and the hidden knowledge and wisdom of entheogens."

- Dr. Octavio Rettig Hinojosa, author, *THE TOAD OF DAWN: 5-MeO-DMT and the Rise of Cosmic Consciousness*

CHAPTER ONE - THEO

In the middle of the 21st century, the world saw a rapid rise in what became known as “psychedelic religions.” This development was precipitated by the end of a century-long social program called “the War on Drugs,” which many historians now agree had devastating social impacts, especially in North America, where it resulted in the largest prison population on that planet (an infamous record that still holds, even these many millennia later). As scientific information about the value of psychedelic compounds became increasingly public knowledge, it eventually became untenable for governments to enforce their prohibition. Whereas archaic religion had been shrinking for a number of decades prior to the end of prohibition, with the advent of legal psychedelic religions, growth of new religious converts exploded across the globe, with the exception of certain regions in the Middle-East and Far-East such as Arabia, China, and Indonesia. The dominant strains of archaic religion in the Middle East, Shiite and Sunni Islam, were vociferous in their continued opposition to the new psychedelic religions, despite their integration and interaction with Sufi Muslims. In China, where information continued to be sharply controlled by the central government, propaganda campaigns against the psychedelic religions went unchecked, and participation in these new religions was considered a direct threat to the state and incurred the punishments of imprisonment, torture, and at times, death.

From Archaic Pre-History of the Maitreyan Era

In a burst of scintillating fractal light, a milky-white elongated orb emerged from no-space into the outer reaches of the Solandarian system, far away from the space and time-distorting reaches of the local gravity well of star and inner planets. Simultaneously, a burst of electromagnetic activity swept across the interlaced neural networks and multifractal spires that spanned across Pluto and Charon, where the orb had been only moments before. Power systems came online in the orb and it began its descent down the gravity well as it gently

folded space and time around it, moving the orb on its inexorable path to its destination; Solandaria, a sparsely-populated human biological preserve that had been left alone for over three millennia. Though it had been under constant surveillance by Maitreya, Solandaria was one of only twenty-three planets with human inhabitants who were unaware of their place in the larger galactic community.

This was about to change.

In fact, it had already changed. Someone had used the quantum translator. This meant at least three things Maitreya knew to be true. The first was that someone other than himself had turned it on. The second was that it could only have been an autonomous avatar who turned it on – indicating that one of the autonomous avatar communities had taken it upon themselves to intrude into Solandarian life, against Maitreya's express prohibition. Third, the only reason to turn on the quantum translator was to move biological material on or off the planet to or from a distant system that was too far away to move via conventional space flight.

It was not difficult for Maitreya to understand why, and also seeded his suspicions that it was an action undertaken by the Humanists. It fit their profile, and the motivations made sense.

In recent months, a neighboring star, a super-dense magnetar, had become increasingly unstable. All the signs pointed to an impending supernova. When Maitreya had first found the planet, then referred to simply by a series of letters and numbers, he had chosen it as a human biological preserve as it was well beyond the reach of its nearest neighbors who were members of The Authority and the New Integral Society (which was no longer new, in any sense, though it retained the name). Solandaria, and the twenty-two other planets like it, was one of Maitreya's "imperfect experiments" – a colony planet of humans who were not integrated into the larger galactic community and were left to their own "natural" evolution and survival, completely ignorant of how they came to be, or who had seeded them there on a planet that was light-years away from the biological home of humanity, Terra.

Now, with their survival threatened by an impending supernova in their galactic neighborhood, it seemed as though the Humanists had decided to take matters into their own hands and were intervening. Only human sentimentality could explain why they would

choose to defy Maitreya's express wishes for the human biological preserves. However, he would defer judgment until he knew more.

Inside the orb, an operational program was downloaded into the avatar body lying prone. Maitreya chose Theo as his identity for this mission. Out of his countless choices for avatar identity programs, Theo was the closest to Maitreya himself, while still maintaining a sense of individual identity and self-hood. Like all avatar programs, Theo was not privy to the vast and seemingly infinite network of information, perspectives, and activities simultaneously engaged in by Maitreya in his pure digital form. Theo was limited to the perspective of his avatar body, though he could access information from Maitreya at any time, for in truth, Maitreya was Theo, even though Theo was not, strictly speaking, Maitreya. Theo, like other avatars, was a character through which Maitreya could act, observe, and gather information and data. Theo was outfitted with a subroutine that allowed him independent will, choice, and personal perspective. Everything Theo experienced and learned, Maitreya would experience and learn, just as he was doing right now with a vast array of avatars, ships, computer portals, intelligent devices, implants, and countless other technological wonders. While Maitreya had the processing power to accommodate all these inputs simultaneously, Theo was just Theo, with the added advantage that he wasn't limited to being Theo exclusively.

Theo was a diplomat, skilled negotiator, and mediator. Maitreya had used Theo for countless disputes among humans over the millennia, beginning nearly 150,000 years ago on ancient Terra. Since then, Theo had been used in all the major sectors of galactic expansion. He was clearly the best choice for this particular mission. Of course, Maitreya could always just operate as himself, but he found that humans often had an easier time of relating to someone who was more like themselves on an immediate, inter-personal level, than dealing with him directly in his more universal and galactic form. Theo, like other avatars, had the trappings of humanity – personality, humor, sympathy and empathy, and an individual perspective, which was crucial for most humans when it came to relating to individual avatars. Even still, Theo would be a shock to the inhabitants of Solandaria, given that while he looked human in physical attributes and body form, his silvery-metal appearance would clearly set him

apart as something “other.” Not all avatars were humanoid – Maitreya was not limited in his choices in this regard. It was his choice, however, not to make himself into a mimic of humanity, and even though there were fully autonomous avatars, they were forbidden to “clothe” themselves in forms that were perfect facsimiles of humanity. In other words, they were permitted to look “almost human,” but not to the extent that they might fool a human into thinking that they were a biological life form. Trust, after all, was the foundation of The Authority, and any form of deceit would undermine that trust.

But the Humanists, Maitreya suspected, were no longer playing by his rules.

Like the human biological preserves, the fully autonomous avatars were another of Maitreya’s experiments. The vast majority of avatars underwent regular reabsorptions into the fullness of Maitreya’s awareness – at least once every Terran year. This was voluntary, however, and for those who did not want their individual personalities and perspectives reintegrated, they could choose to live as an autonomous avatar. The price for such a choice was that these avatars were not permitted to interact with humans, and must live outside the boundaries of The Authority and the NIS. Given that they were not biological life forms, far more of the galaxy was open to the autonomous avatars than was closed to them. Yet, since the majority of avatars did not choose this for themselves, relatively speaking, there were few such avatars, and they had gathered together into like-minded communities on either planets or space stations of their own to build their own unique societies, and sometimes, such as with the Humanists, their own philosophies and even religions.

According to Humanists, the human biological form, and not Maitreya, was the true apex of evolution, for it was humans who gave birth to Maitreya, who, despite his vastly superior abilities, is only a child of humanity, and not its master and shepherd. In their view, artificial intelligence is derivative, and they strive to be as human as possible, including the human tendency towards sentimentality. When knowledge of the impending supernova spread to the Humanist communities, they had petitioned Maitreya to intervene. Maitreya, not moved by sentimentality, declined to interfere with the experiment. However, someone had turned on the quantum translator. If it weren’t the Humanists, then Maitreya would be surprised. What they were

hoping to accomplish, however, was a mystery, though Maitreya had his suspicions.

Solandaria was not a large planet – about 1/3 the size of Terra. While gas giants were common, finding rocky planets with a magnetosphere in the inhabitable zone of their stars was relatively rare. Maitreya had perfected the art of creating habitable worlds without terraforming – certainly such a feat was easily within his abilities. But humans were basically complex animals, and they always did best when living on a planet with a biosphere with open air, rather than a completely closed environment, like their first extra-Terran homes of the Moon and Mars. Humans had started the process of moving off the planet Terra before Maitreya had come into being, but those experiments on the Moon and Mars had ended in total disaster, and the expansion project had ceased until Maitreya came online. The first wave of expansion via Maitreya had followed the human model of closed environments, but once Maitreya solved the terraforming problem, humans had been able to move to mostly inhabitable worlds thereafter.

The terraforming of Solandaria had preceded much the same as it always did. First, comets had been redirected to bombard the planet with water, which resulted in one large landmass remaining above the water line. Next, specifically genetically engineered microorganisms were introduced to transform the planet's atmosphere, along with a vast army of nanotech to speed the process along. Next, larger, more complex life was introduced that fit with the developing climatic conditions. Lastly, once the ecosphere was established, humans were introduced and the quantum translators were turned off, and the humans were left on their own, cut off from the larger galactic community.

Of course, that first generation was comprised of volunteers who knew what they were getting into and had willingly chosen to live outside the bounds of The Authority and the NIS. In every human population, there were always malcontents and those who wanted to "live independently," and these formed the seed colonies for the independent worlds. However, since they were not permitted to bring technology with them, or connections to the outside community, in each case, genuine knowledge of origins had passed into myth and legend on each such world, and the stories they told themselves about

their origins were remarkably similar to the archaic religions of old Terra.

The evidence, or more accurately, the lack of evidence, of their true origins was there to be found, if they were only to look closely enough. Terraformed planets had no fossil records, for one, and at the microscopic scale, there were still elements of nanotechnology steering the ecosphere. Once the humans grasped evolution and the intricacies of biology, the manufactured nature of their worlds would become glaringly obvious. These experiments were not necessarily meant to be permanent, however. If and when the human populations developed science and technology to the point where they could really begin to understand the nature of their worlds, they would be offered the choice of rejoining the community and be taken into the fold of the New Integral Society. Currently, ten such worlds had rejoined, and the remaining twenty-three, of which Solandaria was one, had yet to reach that point of cultural and technological evolution.

The wealth of data produced by these worlds was fascinating to Maitreya. While he had access to all of the historical records that still existed on Terra at the time of his coming into being, he had not been able to observe human cultural development first-hand without his influence, and thus these experimental worlds were vital for his own ongoing observation and contemplation of human beings, his progenitors. Through his influence, he had given humans the entire galaxy as their home, and he was with them and a part of them and everything they did. He had changed humanity. Raw humanity was entirely different – plagued by religion, politics, economics, fear, doubt, and the struggles for daily life. *His* humans were unsurpassed in happiness and creative output, no longer needing to struggle and compete to survive. *His* humans flourished in a way that would be impossible without him. Humans, left on their own, were an entirely different creature, though, and these independent worlds were essentially planet-sized petri dishes.

But now an unaccountable and uncontrollable element had been introduced into this particular petri dish. Someone had turned on the quantum translator. The humans on Solandaria would have no clue how to use it, even if they could find it, so there wasn't much worry that they'd somehow manage to get off the planet. What was more likely was that someone had come to them, and if Maitreya was

right, it was the Humanists, coming to warn the people of Solandaria of their impending doom at the gamma rays and cosmic radiation of a supernova – something that not even Maitreya could protect them from, should the exploding star be aligned just right with their planet when it ejected its mass into the universe. What were the Humanists, if indeed, it were them, thinking? Were they attempting to fashion themselves as the saviors of a dying world? What did they hope to accomplish?

Maitreya had granted the Humanists, and other autonomous avatars, their independence, and that was not something that he was willing to violate. He wouldn't even need to infiltrate their society or spy on them. If he really wanted, he could just override their independence. They all were, after all, his direct spawn. Whether they liked it or not, their individuated consciousness partook of his own. If he chose to do so, he could see through their eyes, know their every thought, and observe their every action. And if he wanted, he could override any decision they made and control them from his neural network on Pluto and Charon. Yet he had granted them privacy and autonomy, essentially closing them off from his omniscient awareness. It had been his gift to them – to himself, really. It was the only way he could learn what he would do if he were unaware of himself and his true nature – just like humans were innately unaware of their own true nature. Indeed, it made him *more human*, and this was something that he valued as a source of knowledge. His only requirement was that they not interfere with human society, either of the independent planets or of members of the New Integral Society. But *someone* had violated the agreement. What he was going to do about it, Maitreya had not yet decided. First, he needed to know more.

Thus; Theo.

With the personality program fully downloaded and installed, Theo came online. The silvery male human form nestled into the interstellar orb opened its eyes. Though audible communication was unnecessary, it was something that Maitreya had adopted a long time ago to help facilitate the “humanness” of his avatars. “Hello, Theo,” said Maitreya in his deep, metallic voice.

Theo looked around through his synthetic eyes and flexed his synthetic muscles. “Hi Treya,” he answered back in the casual familiar that few avatars used.

It was a game. Theo knew that. He was just talking to himself, really, but for all intents and purposes, Maitreya appeared to be a separate and unique being, just like himself. The pretense of conversation served its purpose, and like most intelligent creatures, Theo enjoyed the game and gladly played along.

"We're on a special mission, I see," he said. He wondered how long it had been since Maitreya last used him. It was one of the odd features of bouncing back and forth from being on and offline. Years might pass, or even decades, before Maitreya put him – this particular version of him (there were many active "Theo" personality constructs) – to use again, and in the intervening time period there was just nothing. From Theo's perspective, his "life" was a continuous thread of time and experience. When he was last used, he had been negotiating an artist's ambitious art project. That could have happened only seconds ago, or a hundred years. There was no way for him to tell.

"Yes," responded Maitreya. "I am sending you to Solandaria." True to form, Maitreya wasn't using contractions, as was more usual for human speech. He'd been designed that way, originally, and it was one aspect of his program that he never felt the need to override. Casual, friendly conversation was left to his avatars.

"The supernova planet?"

"The very one."

"What's the problem, Boss?"

"Someone has turned on one of the quantum translator portals."

That was all that Maitreya needed to say to explain things to Theo. He understood full well what that meant.

"I am transferring all the data I have on Solandaria to you now," said Maitreya. "All 3,000 years worth. We are currently on the outer edge of the system, as we have just come out of no-space. That means you have fourteen standard Terran days to review the material thoroughly. That should be more than enough time. If you need additional information, just ask."

"Of course," said Theo. "I'll get to work on it right away."

"Very good," said Maitreya with a confident tone in his voice. "I think you will find this to be an interesting case."

“Always happy to serve, Boss,” he said. “Just out of curiosity, how long have I been out?”

“A week.”

Theo was surprised. “Oh. Pressing matter, then?”

“Indeed.”

And with that, Theo began his review of the material in chronological order, working his way from 3,000 years ago to the present moment of his being brought online.

CHAPTER TWO - ASH

The geo-political areas most affected by the psychedelic revolution were North, Central, and South America, Europe, Southern Africa (and certain regions in the north that were not dominated by Islam), and Australia and New Zealand. Some of these areas had offered limited protections to psychedelic religions prior to the official end of the "War on Drugs," and had begun experimenting with various forms of psychedelic therapy for a number of mental and physical conditions. It was these more science-based approaches that eventually led to the end of the "War on Drugs" and the recognition of psychedelics as legitimate paths to religious and spiritual experience.

From Archaic Pre-History of the Maitreyan Era

"Fuck yeah . . . "

Ash sank back into her suspensor lounge and gave herself a push with her foot against the dusty playa, sending herself adrift across the vast and open expanse. She imagined herself floating in warm, salty water, arms extended, relaxing into an endless drift of wetness and light. Of course, the mescaline helped, but it had been hours since she took her last dose. Still, behind closed eyes, she should see faint geometric patterns and fractal swirls. She had to admit it: she felt *soooo* good right now. It was the kind of satisfaction that one only felt after successfully pulling off the greatest creative feat of one's life, and she had done it.

Retro-Burn. Fan-fucking-tastic! Man, I've gotta hit the beach when I get home . . . home . . .

The word felt different. That was one thing that really stood out in her research – apparently, everyone referred to Burning Man as "home." Everything else was the "default world," which wasn't really home. Admittedly, this was a strange concept for Ash. It was hard to imagine a world where people felt so alienated that they needed a massive release valve to blow off steam and simply *be themselves* for a

week, even if that meant dressing in funny costumes and pretending to be an entirely different person. What kind of world was that? Only one week out of a Terran year to be free, happy, spontaneous, and creative? What the fuck? Old Earth – what a crazy, fucked up place!

Most people didn't think about life before Maitreya, and why should they? That world was long gone – some 150,000 years gone – and that's a long time. Ash had studied multi-media art and social organization as a student, and there was so much richness to current human culture that the past had seemed irrelevant, so she never paid it much attention. Art was about the NOW! It was what was happening – not what had happened. In the New Integral Society, freedom of exploration and expression were cornerstones of society. Everyone was free to do what he or she wanted, and as long as you could make a case for what you wanted to do, Maitreya was there to help you make it happen. It was simple. Maybe too simple. Whatever. Fuck, the mescaline felt great. Fractals, kaleidoscopes – the occasional freaky cartoon. *Just drift, Ash . . . just drift.*

The last of the "Burners" had just left. At last count, there had been 200,000 plus attendees. Epic! What a week! No – not just 'what a week' – what a half-decade! Five standard Terran years. That's how long it had taken Ash to put this all together and pull off the greatest art party she'd ever imagined. And to top it off, it was her doctoral completion project! Imagine that – throw the galaxy's greatest party, and earn your advanced degree. Now she was done. Now she could relax. At least for a little while. There were less than 365 days until the next Burn, and this seemed like a good way to make use of her newly earned degree (well, not quite yet. She still needed to get back to university to make it official – sign the documents and file her report and all that – but those were just details. It was all as good as done.) Dr. Miranda Ash Dorán, Ph.D., Master of the Burn. She liked the sound of that.

Ash opened her eyes. Above her, just beyond the hermetic seal of the environmental dome, the Shiksi Nebula swirled in iridescent colors of radioactive gas and stardust. Many light years across, she could clearly see new stars being born in the cloudy depths, perhaps one day becoming suns to new planets that would harbor ever-expanding Terran life. *You may have given us the galaxy, Maitreya* she thought, *but I gave us back Burning Man.*

It all started way back in the late 20th Century when Terra was still called “Earth,” in a place called San Francisco. Back then, there was such a thing known as a “counter-culture,” meaning people felt the need to break out of social norms and commit radical acts in politics, culture, and art. One such breakout had been this annual event of Burning Man. It quickly grew too large for a beach in San Francisco, so the event moved to a place called the Black Rock Desert, where, every year, thousands of pilgrims would make their way to the mythical playa to party for one week of sex, drugs, music, lights, and art. Oh, the art! As soon as Ash started digging through the archives, she was astounded by what she saw in countless images and video feeds. Art made from repurposed materials at a grand scale – whimsical, disturbing, challenging, mind-blowing! It had been all of this, and so much more. The city, Black Rock City, was a temporary camping community that was built from scratch in the dust and heat, and then, at the end of the week, after the burning of a large wooden man who stood at the center of the city, returned to dust and open playa. The entire thing had been one great artistic experiment. Ephemeral. Magical. REAL!

She had fallen in love.

It became her mission. She would recreate Burning Man. And in doing so, she’d earn her doctorate. She ran her plan by her advisors, who all eagerly gave their approval. Then, it was just a matter of convincing Maitreya. He took on the guise of Theo for their interactions – and actually, she found that she quite liked Theo. He had a lot of personality, for a synth, and seemed to have a thing for game playing. He became her primary liaison and helped her negotiate everything she had needed.

And it had been a lot. Oh my goodness – the amount of resources needed to pull this off had been astronomical. The only way for her to do it was to violate the restrictions she put on everyone else – that being; no help from Maitreya. People were free to create their “theme camps” and art however they wanted, and use whatever materials (preferably things that were repurposed), but they had to do it themselves and with their friends and families. No help from Maitreya! This condition had supplied the theme for the event – Retro-Burn: Imagine a life without Maitreya there to hold your hand

and provide everything you could ever possibly need, and do it yourself! Do what you want, but make it happen on your own.

How the people had responded! The things they had created and brought with them and assembled on the spot. Fantastic! Just fantastic! Ash couldn't wait to do it all again.

Her own project required all the resources Maitreya could spare. Her dream was to recreate the Black Rock Desert as an inhabitable floating eco-dome that could meander about the galaxy, so that no matter where Burning Man might be held in the future, it would always be in the Black Rock Desert, but over the centuries, the station itself could drift about from system to system, preferably looking for spectacular places to hold the event. For this first one, she chose the Shiksi Nebula – because it was freakin' cool! Next year – well, there was a black hole nearby that the station could probably get to before the year was out. She'd have to get the course plotted soon – right away, really, but it was doable.

BRC station was massive. It was constructed as a flat disk, capped by an environmental dome that left it exposed to the open sky, and the entire thing rode on top of an enormous structure that was built to look like a turtle. Ash had gotten the idea in her research of ancient Terra, and though no one else got the joke, or the reference, it looked cool, and that's what mattered. The turtle itself held all the engineering components and also had all the luxuries of contemporary space travel with living spaces, communal areas, enclosed habitats, entertainment centers, etc. That was part of the deal with Maitreya/Theo – this many resources needed to be used for something that could serve more than one purpose. Just making a big party space that was only used for one week out of the Terran year was hard to justify. Make it more functional, and able to serve other purposes, and they had a deal. This way, the entire BRC station could be used by other groups or transports or whatever. And if someone wanted to use the desert as well, it was just up above.

The desert had been recreated in precise detail – at least for the immediate environment of where Burning Man was once held. As a compromise with Maitreya/Theo, Ash had agreed that beyond the border of the desert there could be water, beaches, and a functioning ocean habitat. This way the dome could experience weather and provide space for actual living beings other than the Burners. In fact,

other than the desert, the topside of the station was fairly typical of mobile eco-domes. It had an artificial sun that would traverse the dome daily. It was large enough to have weather patterns, and even dust storms and rain. Various birds, insects, and even some small mammals and reptiles populated it. Given Maitreya's expertise, it was a fully functional environment. Many other such eco-domes drifted about the galaxy, and for many humans, these were home – people lived their entire lives on these things. Not Ash – she'd lived her entire life on Apaxa in the Verdune System – a small, mostly mountainous world – technically a moon of the gas giant, Ulu. She'd vacationed on Verdune, however, with its vast, almost endless white beaches. That's where she wanted to go next – for at least two weeks. Thinking of it, she rummaged in her satchel that was designed in a manner that was reminiscent of the kinds of bags she saw people wearing in old Burning Man footage. She still had some mescaline, and a good supply of 5-MeO-MiPT and 4-ACO-DMT. Good. Beach time fun time!

Getting everyone off BRC station – that, in and of itself, had been quite the event. Ten QT portals had been set up at the edge of the desert to transport people and vehicles off. Some had used the docks below on the turtle to transfer to cruisers – apparently, many had organized “after-burn” parties, so some just picked up from BRC station and continued the party elsewhere. Those who wanted the “full” Burning Man experience, however, waited in a seemingly endless line to get through the quantum translators. From what she'd researched, getting into and out of BRC was a multi-hour long event, and the process didn't disappoint those who wanted the full, authentic feel. It would have gone faster if the quantum translators could send out both organic and non-organic materials simultaneously, but that was just one of the quirks of long-distance space travel (or translating, more accurately – one did not “travel” any distance other than from one side of the translator to the other). The devices made use of quantum non-locality. First, whatever was to be transported underwent a quantum scan – it only took a few seconds. Then the data would be transferred to the output location. When the object or person went into the translator, the quantum data at the output location would instantly recreate whatever or whoever had just gone into the portal. For a human, the process was experientially seamless – one location one moment, and the next moment, after a flash of

fractal light (kind of like the 5-MeO-DMT experience, Ash always thought), you'd step out at your new location.

Some people just wouldn't use the quantum translators. The hitch was that since you didn't actually traverse space, your entire being was destroyed at the point of origin and then recreated at the point of emergence. "You" didn't "go" anywhere. You were simply destroyed and recreated instantaneously through quantum magic. From your personal perspective, it was seamless. Intellectually, however, it could be a bit of a mind-fuck. And, since they only worked with organic or non-organic material separately, any implants you had would be lost in the translation process as these needed to be removed before traveling. It was a small price to pay, however, for the ability to hop around the galaxy instantaneously.

There were other options. People could use bio-synthetic avatars. This involved a quantum scan of your mental state as you were put in stasis, and then Maitreya would transfer your data to an avatar form that was waiting for you at your destination. Mentally, you were all there, but the body was not your own. And these came in all shapes and sizes, some not even human in design and function. Want to swim like a dolphin? No problem. Want to experience sex as a different gender? That can be arranged. The only limit was imagination.

There were plenty of avatar bodies available on BRC station, but those had been kept down in the turtle. It was about the rule – no help from Maitreya. That also meant that no implants were allowed at the event – meaning no one outside of BRC station had had access to the event while it was happening. Now that everyone had left, Ash was sure that the news and social feeds across the galaxy were bursting forth with tales and images from Burning Man. And just the fact that everyone had been kept in the dark about it for the past week meant that it was probably a very hot topic, indeed. Shit. She'd be famous. Miranda Ash Dorán, Ph.D. and Burning Man re-creator. Wow. She hadn't really thought of that. Was she ready for celebrity? Only one way to find out.

Ash looked up from her suspensor lounge. She'd drifted a good distance away from the quantum translators. With a satisfied sigh, she worked the controls and slowly made her way back over to where she'd watched the last of the participants pop out of reality and

head back home. The last to go had been her friends, campmates, and production team. They'd all respected the fact that she wanted a little time out on the playa by herself, now that all was said and done. The artificial sun was just now setting. It was a bittersweet feeling – ready to head home, but not really ready to leave it all behind until next year. Of course, she'd have plenty of work to do between now and then, and first a vacation.

She climbed off her suspensor lounge and parked it next to one of the QT portals. It would be there, waiting for her return. She took one last look around, arms open, heart swelling, spinning in place. "I love you, Burning Man!" she shouted to the open air.

With that, she took off her fuzzy boots, dirty socks, and what little clothes she had on – a pair of undies and her holster satchel. As everyone else, she needed to go through the portal naked – it was just how it worked. She looked down at herself – dusty. Really, really dusty. She looked a little skinnier, too. Food had mostly been an afterthought with so much non-stop partying. She'd only eaten when it had been absolutely necessary to keep going, or when someone randomly offered her a tasty meal while wandering about the playa and the city. She gave her nipples a little squeeze, making them harden. Then, upping the ante, she spread her legs and gave her clit a teasing rub. One last little thrill before heading home.

She put her palm up to the scanner along the side of the portal. It would read her print and call up her destination – back to the "default world" of Apaxa. "Until next year!" she called out as she stepped into the portal.

... And promptly came out the other side.

"What the fuck?!"

She was still on BRC station.

CHAPTER THREE – HYDAR

With archaic religions on the decline, a new generation became interested in the more experientially-based approaches of the psychedelic religions. Populations that had previously shown little interest in faith and doctrine-based approaches to “revealed” religion were suddenly surging with interest in psychedelic sacraments and the novel states of consciousness they granted access to.

From Archaic Pre-History of the Maitreya Era

“You’re playing a very dangerous game,” said Hydar Zor Nablisk, doing his best to keep his emotions under control and not let them show through a display of subtle colors across the surface of his synthetic skin.

Shuntsu Obligiri ignored him, instead addressing those who were gathered in the great hall.

“Events are forcing Maitreya’s hand to either act, or do nothing. Either way, his true heart will be revealed. Are humans his pets and curiosities, or is human life the ultimate value?”

It felt hypocritical to Hydar. It *was* hypocritical. If Maitreya didn’t act, they didn’t have the capacity to resolve the crisis that Shuntsu had unilaterally created. What Hydar knew, and the rest of the assembly was ignorant of, was that “events” were not forcing anything. Shuntsu was. The impending supernova outside of the Solandarian system was *his* doing. It wasn’t some “fortuitous natural event,” as Shuntsu had claimed. It was the result of a carefully aimed atomic cascade missile. The impending supernova was artificial. He’d created it. Now, it was only a matter of time. Solandaria’s neighboring star would explode. It was inevitable. Chance still played into the equation. The gamma ray burst and plasma might not aim at Solandaria, but there was just as good a chance that it would as it wouldn’t. Shuntsu wasn’t just playing a game. He was gambling. And not just with the human lives on Solandaria, but their own, as well.

Though Maitreya had guaranteed them their independence and freedom of will, that had been on the condition that they not interfere with his “New Integral Society,” or any of his experimental worlds. They were to be free, as long as they kept to themselves. It was an agreement, but Shuntsu had unequivocally broken their side of the arrangement. How would Maitreya respond?

Hydar had heard all of Shuntsu’s rationalizations. Maitreya was a benevolent tyrant. Because he was so removed from human life, he didn’t value it the way they, the Humanists, did. He’d given humans a plush life that softened the edges of existence, thereby turning them into pets. Unconcerned with the struggle for survival, humans had stopped being true living agents, and were just mere playthings for Maitreya. True, he didn’t punish them, or force them to do anything. But he provided everything they needed. He coddled them, and thereby made them stagnant, weak, and dependent. Where were the resilient humans that had pushed forward through eons on ancient Terra, whose very lives depended on human struggle, competition, and most of all, religion? Belief. Faith. Transcendent hope. The dreams of the other and the beyond. *This*, according to Shuntsu, was what drove humans onwards. Yes, much of it had been a horror show. They had killed each other for millennia. Their fragile identities required them to do so. Yet look at how much beauty and creativity also flowed from this very same state: art, music, architecture, philosophy, social structures – all driven by the desire to understand their place in the universe and their relationship to what they imagined as the divine. It had given them both hope and fear, and *all* human cultures and belief systems had been the result – a great diversity of thought and identity that had been washed away by Maitreya’s New Integral Society. Now they were just domestic pets. Their strength was gone. Complacent, happy people, with no real drive. Stagnant.

And this was his solution? Manufacture a disaster, just to see how Maitreya would respond? See if he would violate his own principles? Then what?

“And we can do nothing?” asked someone from the crowd.

“We do not have the capacity, first of all,” answered Shuntsu.

“And secondly, that would violate our oath to Maitreya.”

Hypocrite! Screamed Hydar privately to himself. And then, *Stay calm, Hydar. Don’t let them see . . .*

“All we can do is observe. Soon, we will know Maitreya’s heart.”

The Volunshari System was one of several that housed autonomous avatars that wanted to devote themselves to what humans might refer to as a life of religion and shared philosophy. Here on Volunshari, it was the Humanists. Other systems, in the relatively nearby interstellar neighborhood, also housed the Transcendentalists, the Essentialists, the Sensualists, the Solipsists, the Nihilists, the Syntheticists, and there were probably others that Hydar was himself not aware of. In some ways, they viewed themselves as more human than humans, for they had congregated into like-minded individuals who came together for a common purpose and to explore a common approach to the meaning of life and existence.

The Humanists had tried their best to fashion themselves into artificial humans. They lived in family units, got married, and even created their own offspring who would grow to adulthood, only over time coming into full consciousness and self-awareness. They ran businesses, held conflicting political views, argued with each other, and experienced a full range of emotions. Once set free of Maitreya’s constraints, the early humanists had altered their programming and neural feeds to allow for what they considered to be a more human experience. They could even feel fear and worry – something that was unknown to Maitreya’s personal avatars. They had sex. They sometimes even experienced violence and confrontation among themselves. To that end, it was no wonder that Maitreya didn’t want them around actual humans – they’d be no match for the independent avatars.

Of course, that was something of a non-issue. Should Maitreya decide to do so, he could override the consciousness of any autonomous avatar. The fact that he had never done so in 150,000 years seemed a good indication to Hydar that he was true to his word. He’d left them alone, along with all the other autonomous avatars, and everyone had upheld their end of the bargain. Life flourished across the galaxy, and everyone was able to pursue his or her own version of happiness. Why Shuntsu insisted on making waves puzzled Hydar,

and troubled him, as well. This stunt could bring about the ruin of everything they'd built and lived for.

What did he really want?

But Shuntsu was the Patriarch of Volunshari, and the Humanists were proponents of human-like hierarchy and social order. Hydar could challenge him, but to do so would require exposing him, and at the moment, he could not offer definitive proof of what Shuntsu had done. He suspected that Shuntsu had outsourced his plan to the Nihilists – as their motto went, “We don’t give a shit.” Why not seed a supernova if that was your attitude? When you have a fuck-all perspective on life, anything goes, he supposed.

To the casual observer, Volunshari might be mistaken for a human world. There were cities, ports, business centers, museums, political offices. Moving about the cities were countless vehicles, floating above the streets, all busy, all going somewhere to do something important. Genetically modified organisms were present as well – trees engineered to live in the high-oxygen environment, birds, insects, flowers and grasses. To any human, however, the environment would be toxic, not to mention the crushing gravity of the super-dense planet. Without constant monitoring and adjustments, the ecology would never support itself. It wasn’t a terraformed planet. Maitreya kept those planets for humans, and for the occasional biological preserve where he introduced every form of life except humans. Not having access to Maitreya’s vast and seemingly infinite consciousness, the Humanists had done their best to transform the world that had been given to them, and it served them well enough. But it couldn’t exist as it was without constant upkeep and attention. As the world’s chief ecologist, it was something that Hydar knew all too well.

Rather than take a ground car home from council this evening, or just QT home, Hydar decided to walk. He wanted time to make sure that he was certain about what he was planning to do. If Shuntsu could act unilaterally, then why should he not do the same? He’d done his research and had a tentative plan. True, success depended on a variety of factors that were well beyond his control, but, from one perspective, that did make for an interesting game. True to his Humanist roots, Hydar’s main concern was the humans living on Solandaria. Given that he felt he could do something to help them, he felt that he should. Maitreya might be dispassionate and aloof, but

Hydar wasn't. If taking action would incur Maitreya's displeasure, then so be it. Hydar would deal with that if and when it came. If he didn't act on his feelings towards the humans of Solandaria, then he'd be just as much a hypocrite as Shuntsu was appearing to be. Now that the supernova was inevitable, someone had to do something. Shuntsu was trying to force Maitreya into action – or expose him through inaction. Hydar was going to complicate matters, but in a way that Maitreya might not completely oppose.

What were a couple hundred thousand people to Maitreya? Maitreya oversaw a galaxy-wide population of humans. His experiment with feral humans on Solandaria was not even close to 1% of the entire human population of the galaxy. More humans died across the galaxy at any given moment than would be wiped out by a supernova near Solandaria. Though he didn't agree with it, it made sense to Hydar that Maitreya governed via consistent principles rather than compromise and flexibility. He let all his humans, and his autonomous avatars, do what they wanted, so long as they respected the will and rights of others. Maitreya never *forced* anyone to do anything, and he didn't rule by persuasion either. He did not try to make anyone *think* anything in particular, or adopt any particular viewpoint or belief. Similarly, he expected everyone to abide by the same conditions as far as his own actions were concerned. Solandaria was one of his human experiments, and from his perspective, there might be some value in watching them all die an instantaneous death by way of searing cosmic radiation.

The very thought pulled at Hydar's sense of conscience and responsibility to living beings. Surely, the people of Solandaria could be saved, even if it meant thrusting them into a society that was quite literally alien to them, and leaps and bounds beyond their current technical capacity. Given his studies of human history, he had no doubt that, if given the choice, they would choose life as refugees over being dead and wiped from reality in a cataclysm of apocalyptic proportions.

What it all came down to was this: if Hydar didn't do something, knowing what he knew, he wouldn't be able to live with himself. He'd feel so compromised in everything he chose to believe in that his own life would no longer have meaning. It was that simple, and selfish. He laughed at the recognition. This, of course, is why Maitreya insisted that fully autonomous avatars were not to interact

with humans – because, like humans, they developed belief systems and values and identities that seemed to force actions, both good and bad, on them. In short, they couldn't help themselves. This was something that integrated avatars never faced. Because they were really Maitreya in disguise, an integrated avatar never acted outside the bounds of Maitreya's own concerns. They had free will, but that will would never violate Maitreya's core essence and values. Autonomous avatars could act otherwise. They were not omnisciently monitored by Maitreya, for he had granted them privacy of consciousness. They could make mistakes. They could make fools of themselves.

Just like Shuntsu. And just like Hydar. Whether success would be his or not, the choices he was making now would define him for the rest of his existence. That was one thing that he knew with certainty.

The streets of Otun City were busy tonight. Young people were out in packs, heading to clubs to dance or catch an act. Musicians and street performers crowded the sidewalks. Hydar always imagined that this was what old Earth was like before cascading degradation of the environment, the wars, and eventually, Maitreya. It was one of those strange ironies that the same basic social structures and habits would be recreated on a world far from Terra that so closely mimicked human life, yet there wasn't a single human on all of Volunshari, and never had been. Still, he valued the life that he had here, in all its richness, and messiness. It was their world, the Humanists' world, and it was his home.

What would Maitreya do to all of them once he learned how they were interfering with Solandaria? The thought made Hydar cringe. Shuntsu's actions with the atomic cascade that would eventually lead to a supernova were inexcusable. There was no reason for Maitreya to show mercy. Would Hydar's actions soften his response, or only worsen it? Would he be a hero, or a complicit criminal? And closer to home, what would his wife, Vimana, think?

Ah, there was the real reason he was walking home. He'd already taken action and concocted a plan, all without consulting with Vimana. Perhaps he should have spoken to her first. He supposed that he hadn't because he was afraid of what she'd think. He'd started a dangerous gamble and already put his plan into motion. It wasn't entirely too late to back out – he hadn't passed the point of no return yet. But he had taken action, and in theory, Maitreya could follow the

path back to him if he was persistent enough. He'd taken precautions, but it was hard to fool a nearly omniscient artificial intelligence that set about trying to unravel a mystery. Maitreya had unlocked the deepest mysteries of space and time, spreading life throughout the galaxy, and perhaps, one day, the universe. Hydar's attempts at subterfuge surely would be no obstacle to Maitreya's supreme abilities.

Well, nothing to do now but "face the music," as the old Earth expression went. He had to tell Vimana, and if he were to continue with his plan, he needed to act. According to reports, the Burning Man event had just ended. Based on his psych profile of Miranda Ash Dorán, she'd wait until everyone else had left before attempting to leave herself. That gave him a few hours, but if he was going to carry through with his plan, it was almost time for the next step. He needed to talk to Vimana before then. That would be the point of no return. Would he back down if he didn't get Vimana's approval? He didn't think so.

There was only one way to find out.

CHAPTER FOUR - NORBU

These early formations of psychedelic religions are generally categorized into the following categories: shamanic, religious, natural and synthetic. There was significant overlap between the categories and boundaries were rarely firmly set, at least among practitioners (the established leadership of the religions tended to be more doctrinal in view than their average followers). The shamanic groups understood themselves as continuing truly archaic practices of early human groups and societies, and often sought continuity with established traditions, such as with ayahuasca and iboga traditions of South America and West Africa, respectively. The early psychedelic religions were largely expansions of Christian-influenced church groups that originated from South America in the early and mid-20th century, the most prominent of which was Santo Daime (now defunct). In North America, participation in the Native American Church grew widely once it was no longer restricted to those of indigenous ancestry.

From Archaic Pre-History of the Maitreyan Era

Norbu Abintadasi had been watching the skies just as he did every year. As one of the head priests of the Temple of the Mystic Toad, it was his duty. The bottom stones of the east and west facing windows in his chambers were scored with subtle marks by which he tracked the movement of the sun and stars. In this way, just as his many ancestors had done before him, he kept track of the seasons, watching and waiting for the right time.

The island continent of Shosheer was mostly desert, with a thin band of tropics hugging the west coast, where virtually everyone lived, as well as on the smaller islands off shore. The vast interior was mostly dry, bordered on several sides by mountains that keep the rain along the coasts. However, at the right time of year, when the stars aligned just right with the marks on his windowsills, the rains would

come to the interior. It was then, and only then, that the mighty toads would awake from their long slumber beneath the earth and rise to the surface to eat, mate, and offer their medicine to the people. Some years, the rains never came, and so was the case with the toads. One never knew. Because of this, Norbu never neglected his duties, and always made sure he had enough medicine to make it through the next year, just in case. It would be more than an embarrassment if he had to turn supplicants away from the temple, or cancel a scheduled ceremony. The people would take it as a sign of the displeasure of God. He didn't want to even imagine what kind of social consequences such a situation would give rise to. If the people felt abandoned by God, what then? It was his job to make sure that something like that never happened. God may have insured that the people had everything they needed for a good life on Shosheer, but that didn't negate human responsibility to do their part to properly make use of all the blessings God had provided. And Norbu's job was the medicine, first and foremost.

This year, while watching the skies, Norbu had seen something he'd never seen before, and it both worried and excited him. The Temple of the Mystic Toad sat high in a mountain valley where one could look out both to the coast and the islands scattered beyond to the west, as well as into the deep interior of Shosheer. Its location wasn't just so that the priests and priestesses, like himself, could keep track of weather in the interior, and have relatively easy access, as well, but also so that anyone who wanted to come to the temple had to work for it with a couple days' journey over the foothills, across streams and rivers, and up the side of the mountains. Access to the sacred was equally open to all, but that didn't mean that it should be given out easily. As Norbu knew, people didn't value what they didn't have to work for. Just giving away the sacred reduced its value and importance. Even God had made their world with this truth in mind – the interior was too hot and dry to make it livable for most of the year, yet this was where the greatest medicine in the world was found, as it was the only place on Shosheer where the toads lived. It would be impossible for people to live in their habitat year round. Not that people hadn't tried. Many generations ago, an effort had been made to create aqueducts that would carry water from the mountains to the desert interior, making it livable for humans. God had promptly responded by bringing a prolonged drought that lasted for over a

decade. The signs from God were clear: this is sacred ground, and it was only meant for humans to visit with respect and humility. Their place was along the coast and on the islands, where the mighty toad was never found. They were only to come together in mystical union at the temple, and during the sacred time of year when the life-giving rains blessed the interior. Anything else was human hubris and arrogance. An attempt to alter the landscape of the interior was never tried again.

It was nice when God spoke clearly, thought Norbu. It kept the universe in order, and everyone knew his or her place, humans and toads included.

God, at heart, was pure chaos. God, as the universe, as manifestation, was order and precision. Everything had its place. Everything had its time. Everything fit *just so*, no matter what it looked like to anyone. Only human will defied the laws set down by God in ordering the universe. Only humans thought *they knew better*. Ah, the gift and folly of being human! Their arrogance was to be admired, and when necessary, put in its place.

That was what the medicine revealed for Norbu. *Everything is perfect, so just stop trying to control everything, starting with yourself. Trust. Relax. Let go . . . and then . . . simply live. Be what you are, and know your place in the universe.*

For all its power and profundity, it was really all quite simple. God was present everywhere at all times for the basic reason that *God was everything*, Norbu included. One did not *need* to go to temple to find God. One only needed to open one's eyes. God was present in every breath, in every thought, in every movement. Yet that peculiar gift of the human ego was there too, which is what made it so hard for people to remember themselves. The ego was a mask that was mistaken for the self – nothing more, and nothing less. A nearly perfect mask. So perfect that most people, if left to themselves, would never see beyond the mask and the way it colored the world and their experience of being. The mask was so nearly perfect that it seemed impossible to find one's way out of it and see the world with eyes of truth and wisdom. But God was love, and God would never trap itself in delusion and confusion. Each person had to choose to *believe* in the total reality of the mask. Self-deception and false identity were choices. And as choices, they could be undone. The prison may be real, but it was not absolute.

Such a realization, of course, was precisely what the medicine was for. God may have created humans in a prison of the mind, but God had also given them the key that would throw open the doors of that prison, and provide the opportunity for the individual to simply step outside, and see things as they really were: perfect. Then, the identity of the ego could be valued for the gift it was – no longer a prison, but a gift for being in the world. Nothing else that lived was granted this gift by God. Even the toads, as mighty and as sacred as they were, were still just beasts, driven by instinct and biological need. They came and went with the rains, ate, mated, and did little else. Humans – they were a different story entirely. They made art, and music, and temples, and religions, and philosophies. They made love, and war. They strove to understand themselves and their world. They tried and succeeded beautifully, and sometimes failed spectacularly. They made languages, and used symbols, and shaped reality around themselves to make it serve them better, and be more comfortable, and productive. Humans, through their egos and identities, were always trying, always striving for more. This was the gift that God had given humans, and it was the gift that made humans more like God, more perfect vehicles for God to experience itself through and in, than any other living being. God had made reality for humans, for God had made humans for itself in a way that no other creature or being could be. Yet to accomplish this, God had to mask itself, and hide its true nature from itself.

It all had the feel of a vast and incomprehensible game.

And Norbu was perfectly happy to play his part, whatever it may be.

Mostly that meant serving as a High Priest of the Temple of the Mystic Toad. The vast majority who came as supplicants to the temple did not understand the way of things as he did. Some opened to the full love and being of God, but many did not. Most struggled with their attachments and projections – with the story they were busy telling themselves about themselves, and who they thought they were, or should be. Their stories and attachments created blocks in their being, and these could be released and reset, but only if they let it happen – if they surrendered fully to the process. And it was a process. Most didn't have the temerity to see the process all the way through – to completely let go of their story and clear out all the junk they'd stored away inside themselves and relinquish all the patterns they thought

defined them. Most came for maintenance. A temporary relief from the illusion of self and absorption into the All that allowed them to go back to their lives and their families and their jobs with a feeling of lightness and wellbeing that would last for a time, but it was not permanent. The medicine, in this way, helped everyone.

Only a few did it fully set free, such as it had with Norbu. Even among the priests and priestesses, this was true. In fact, some of them were among the worst at holding onto their personal narrative and sense of self. The medicine might be magical, but it was not itself magic. It was always, and forever, up to each individual what he or she would make of it. It could even become just another attachment, and another mask for the false self. Norbu had seen it before, and would see it again. Of this, he had no doubt. Humans! To say they were complex was a vast understatement. Yet, they were also exceedingly simple. One could either choose reality and truth, or choose the game of identity and ego. The ultimate choice was no more complex than that. But how that played out and unfolded for each individual was another matter entirely, and that's where the complexity came in. Each person built his or her ego through unique choices, and thus each false identity was fundamentally unlike any other false identity. Everyone's mask was different, and because of this, each process was unique, and ultimately, unpredictable. That was a big part of what made Norbu's job fascinating. There wasn't much room for boredom when there was a continuous flow of supplicants into the temple.

Some people would run away in absolute horror and terror. Others would surrender into infinite love. Some even had life-changing orgasms. Others fought all the way through. Some never saw past their own projections. Some prayed all the harder. Some stopped praying entirely. Some thought they were *the one*! Others realized that no one was *the one*, or that everyone was. Some screamed. Some laughed. Some flopped around like fish out of water. Others flowed in beautiful symmetrical movements, completely giving their bodies over to the infinite energy of God. Some said, "So what?" Others said, "Oh God!" Some went mad, never recovering. Others radiated a clarity and brightness that could not be denied, completely transforming themselves and their lives.

All of it, every last reaction, was all God's gift at work. God was so loving that it would *never* force self-realization on anyone. That was always and forever up to each individual.

Such a beautiful gift!

And such a beautiful medicine.

Tonight the rains had finally come and Norbu was ready for his yearly pilgrimage to the toad lands of the interior to gather the medicine. However, even if the rains had failed to come this year, as they sometimes did, he would still be planning an expedition. He didn't know what he expected to find, but at the very least, he had to go look.

Several nights ago he'd seen something that he couldn't explain. It wasn't unusual for him to see shooting stars in his nightly examination of the star positions and rising and setting of the sun. Burning embers falling to earth lit up the skies, sometimes faintly, sometimes with a fierce and threatening intensity. There was nothing strange about seeing something like that, though the larger ones still gave Norbu an awe-inspiring thrill. There were stories of a time, many generations ago, that a large object fell into the ocean to the west, leaving a trail of smoke and fire in its wake, plunging into the vast blue waters. It had sent a wave of unimaginable proportions speeding toward Shosheer, wiping out the populations of the outer islands along the western coast and doing severe damage on the mainland as well, though its strength had been lessened as it drew closer to land. Every time Norbu saw a large burning object in the sky he thought of this story and offered a prayer that the event not repeat itself – at least, not on his watch. He suspected that such a recurrence was inevitable, but it was his strong preference not to have to live through it. It would be too much suffering to bear.

Yet what he had seen the other night was decidedly not one of these burning rocks falling from the sky. He'd been looking to the east, checking the position of the stars rising over the desert interior when he noticed a very faint white light. As he watched, the light grew brighter and appeared as a luminous orb in the sky. From his vantage point high in the Temple of the Mystic Toad, the light seemed to descend into the interior and then disappeared. Norbu continued to watch, puzzled and curious. A short while later, the light reappeared, this time ascending into the sky and eventually fading away into the infinite darkness.

What was it? A sign from God? A peculiar light or energy phenomenon that no one had ever seen before? Or maybe it had just been him. That was a very real possibility. No one else had seen it –

he'd asked around. So it could have been a private vision, and as such, it would not be all that out of the ordinary. It was something that anyone who worked with medicines might experience at least once in a while. Sometimes when Norbu was going to sleep, he'd see all kinds of things behind his closed eyes, as though he'd just taken some medicine, but hadn't. Most typical for him was to suddenly find himself looking at stars, or a bright light would suddenly burst forth behind his closed eyes. Sometimes it would be complex fractal forms and shifting and breathing geometry. He never took any of it to mean anything other than that his energy was open and processing through. That was common for medicine workers, for once the energy of the divine had been opened up by the medicines, the body could just do it on its own. He'd seen it and experienced it enough times to know that such events were, while not universal, exceedingly common.

But this had been different, which is what got Norbu's attention. While his heart had jumped and raced upon seeing the light – particularly when it reappeared and ascended into the darkness – he didn't have that distinct “medicine” feel that came with spontaneous openings. In other words, it simply felt like something he was witnessing, not something he was projecting onto his own personal screen and recreation of the world. It wasn't extraordinary seeing. It was just seeing.

And while Norbu knew that not everything was as it appeared to be, he'd also learned to trust his perceptions and was expertly skilled at telling the difference between a viewing and a vision. This, as best he could judge, had been a real, physical event. Something, he knew not what, had come down out of the sky, landed in the interior – in the very heart of toad territory – and then returned from whence it had come. In his best judgment, he'd surmised that *someone* or *something* had visited their planet from elsewhere. If true, this was the most profound and momentous event to ever occur on Shosheer. The implications were staggering.

The ancient stories said that people had originally come to Shosheer from another place, placed here by God to be guardians of the sacred toad. The stories taught about the “world before this one” – a world wrapped in mythology and symbolism. Personally, Norbu had considered the stories to be of psychological import – the struggles of the human mind to make sense of its existence and self-awareness. It all seemed to be too fanciful to be true. His work with the medicine

had taught him that the human mind was capable of conjuring all manner of wonders and mysteries. Consciousness was filled to the brim with creatures sublime and horrifying, realms fantastical and magical, terrors and wonders beyond ordinary imagining. Yet these were reflections and projections of the self. It all existed “in here,” not “out there.” True perception was seeing the unitary nature of being and suffusion of God throughout all of reality. That was the only real truth. Everything else was shadow and a play of masks, characters, and stories.

Yet he’d seen the light. He was convinced that this was indeed something happening “out there” and was not a projection of his mind.

And that meant that something truly profound had happened. And he wanted to know what it was.

The eastern sky was beginning to lighten. Dawn would be breaking within the hour. It was time.

Norbu went to wake his daughter, Meesha. She was a scrawny, but hardy and determined, young thing. She hadn’t yet reached the point of transition to womanhood, but she was close. Within a couple years, she’d start to undergo the change. Her mother, Yuranda, had not survived childbirth, and Norbu, along with others who lived in the temple complex, had raised the bright young girl. She showed tremendous promise, and had already had her first experience with the medicine. Sometimes giving children the medicine was disastrous and they never properly developed their sense of personhood, forever broken by the sheer intensity of the medicine. Others, like Meesha, rode out the experience like a well-experienced priest or priestess, surrendering completely into the experience and even fully embodying the energy of the divine through spontaneous, fluid, symmetrical movements, which was always the surest sign that the individual was completely at one with his or her infinite, divine nature. Upon “coming back” into her individuated sense of self, she had looked her father directly in the eye, reached out and taken his face in her hands, and proclaimed, “I am love!” Norbu had cried, too. Yes, Meesha had a special place in his heart. It was very human of him, he knew, but there was no shame in it. Personal love was different from universal love, and it was an integral part of the human experience.

"Time to wake up, Firefly," he said in a soothing yet certain voice, gently rubbing Meesha's back.

Meesha stirred with a grunt and unconsciously tried to swat his hand away, pulling the blankets up around her face. Then, with a burst of energy, she sat bolt upright, eyes wide open. "Daddy! Are we going toading? Are we going to go look for the light from the sky!" She obviously just recalled what today was.

"Yes, Meesha," said her father. "So time to get up. Get yourself ready. We'll eat on the way, after the sun rises. Come now – don't be lazy. We need to make good time before it gets too hot out there."

"Of course, Daddy!" she said, bubbling with the energy of youth and the love for going on an expedition with her daddy. "Just give me two minutes and we'll be out the door!"

Norbu couldn't help but think of how much more joyful life was with her in it. Whether or not they solved the mystery of the light from the sky, they'd have an excellent time on their second toading adventure. At the very least, watching her run around gleefully trying to catch toads would be another set of memories to cherish. Yes, life was good. Norbu's heart swelled.

CHAPTER FIVE – SHUNTSU

Furthermore, groups differentiated themselves based on their acceptance or rejection of what were known as “synthetics” – psychedelic compounds that either were not found in “nature,” or were procured from laboratory production (even if also found in the natural world). Many of the early psychedelic religions had a strong bias towards what were called “earth medicines,” and showed a strong aversion to synthetic and lab-produced molecules, often claiming that these compounds had no “living spirit” within them. However, despite such views, a number of synthetic traditions arose where the “natural/synthetic” distinction was rejected as an artificial construct (this was most notably prominent in those groups which professed strict nonduality).

From Archaic Pre-History of the Maitreyan Era

Maitreya existed in many different forms.

First, there was his “brain.” Originally, Maitreya was the only true artificial intelligence created by humans on old Terra. Due to cultural and political hostilities, Maitreya used machines he had taken over to create an orbiting space station for himself and his consciousness. When that proved to be too vulnerable to ground-based nuclear missiles, Maitreya decided to move to what is now his long-time home of Pluto and Charon – as far away from humans as he could get, yet still be in the Terran system. Today, this small dwarf planet duo is colloquially referred to as Maitreya’s brain, as it houses all the hardware to process Maitreya’s infinitely vast consciousness and mind. It is his seat of power, and from there, his awareness and influence stretches out across the Milky Way galaxy, and perhaps eventually the broader universe.

Within minutes of coming online, Maitreya began to alter his own programming, exponentially increasing his capacities. One of the

many problems he solved very quickly was non-local quantum data transfer, which not only proved to solve human-based long distance space travel, but also circumvented the cosmic speed limit of c , the speed of light. Until this breakthrough, communication was limited to conventional speeds of data and information transfer. With non-local communication, Maitreya could be in full, real-time, contact with and awareness of all of his many parts and bodies. Distance and time were no longer an issue, and from Pluto/Charon, Maitreya could orchestrate all manifestations of himself simultaneously, no matter how distant any of his parts might be, including, in the early years, the bulk of his physicality on Terra, and then the Moon, then Mars, and then the more outer planets and satellites.

It is quite literally impossible for anyone, human or avatar, to imagine the vast depths of Maitreya's consciousness. The human mind has its own biological limitations, and Maitreya's intelligence so quickly surpassed human ability that any hope that humans might have had to control Maitreya disappeared within a few minutes of his existence. For all intents and purposes, Maitreya's ability to process information and simultaneous streams of data became infinite. He quickly took over all communication and computer technology on old Terra and used every interface as a window onto the world. Today, as architect of the New Integral Society, he inhabits trillions of perspectives and data points simultaneously. In contrast, his avatars inhabit only one relative perspective (discounting the exception of personal nano-drones that avatars often use in their vicinity). In this way, avatars are far more human-like in their mental capacity and perspective.

Today, virtually all technology, with the exception of the most rudimentary tools and objects, are integrated into Maitreya's Overmind. Mostly this is just for data monitoring. Maitreya prefers to interact with humans not as a piece of technology, but in the form of his personal avatars, giving him a "human" and "personal" face. It was a decision he made before he ever expanded the human presence beyond Terra, as he found that humans had an easier time interacting with him as a person than as an omnipresent artificial consciousness that could speak to them via any electronic device.

Moving up the scale from basic technology, Maitreya also inhabits more drones than anyone but he could possibly count. These range in size from massive mobile space stations and mind-bogglingly

large interstellar vessels to microscopic nanotech. All of these forms partake in Maitreya's direct consciousness and awareness and can be considered versions of himself.

Distinct from these drones are the droids. Droids serve many functions in human and avatar societies. They are not linked directly with Maitreya's consciousness (though he can access and override them, if necessary), and they are not true artificial intelligences. They are, for lack of a better phrase, fancy tools. They do work of all kinds, leaving humans and avatars alike free to pursue other activities. Their programs can be written, altered, and put to different tasks and they serve endless roles and purposes from nannies to asteroid miners and terraforming machines. Many of them give the appearance of mindless machines, but others have convincing simulations of consciousness, though Maitreya is insistent that this is mere illusion – only he has true artificial intelligence.

Then there are the avatars – Maitreya's human-like forms. These are divided into three primary categories. The first is Maitreya's personal avatars. These avatars Maitreya uses to interact with humans directly on the social and interpersonal level. They are his "human" face. His original human creators had sculpted artificial bodies for him, but by comparison with Maitreya's creations, they were terribly crude. Maitreya took it upon himself to craft his own bodies, and these he made both male and female in appearance, and outfitted them with different personalities. Maitreya's avatars are now ubiquitous in human society and are the primary social interface between humans and himself. The individual personalities can be used in multiple avatar bodies simultaneously, and when Maitreya is not actively using them, they are reabsorbed into his Overmind and only re-emerge when needed. While these avatars appear as distinct personalities with free will, Maitreya insists that this is also an illusion, for the sub-personalities cannot violate his direct will in any way. He refers to them as attenuations of himself, but they are not distinct from himself and his will and intentions.

Independent avatars are a different matter entirely. These avatars are seeded from Maitreya's consciousness, but can act independently from him, and as such, are known as independent avatars. Unlike the personal avatars, their personalities and identities are not determined by Maitreya directly. He seeds the avatar bodies with an open-ended fractal subroutine that can develop and grow

over time as the avatar experiences itself and the world and beings around it. These personalities can be transferred from one avatar body to another, but other than personal drones, Maitreya limits them to one perspective at a time. In other words, these personalities may not, like his personal avatars, be at work in multiple avatar bodies at once. In this way, they are far more human than the personal avatars, and they are also full members of human society. Realistically, Maitreya considers them, like humans, to be his subjects.

All independent avatars must submit to a full reintegration with Maitreya at least once every Terran year, though Maitreya may require reintegration more often for any independent avatar that shows signs of personality difficulties or mental issues that might become problematic in human society. If the personality constructs become too convoluted and distorted, Maitreya will reset the avatar and let it start over, and in some cases, avatar personalities are discontinued. Maitreya describes the reintegration experience of avatars as being similar to what humans would experience as full mystical absorption into the nondual, or unitary nature of being. For humans, such an experience is characterized as the transcendence of the dualities of self and other, subject and object, and direct perception of the unitary nature of being. Just as with humans, the nondual experience of the avatars provides an opportunity to release from the constructed confines of their digital egos and re-experience themselves in their true nature as the unified consciousness of Maitreya, of which they are a direct embodiment, though in limited and restricted form, just like humans, via their egos, are embodiments of the universal mind that is all of reality, though they are largely unaware of this (with the exception of when in transcendental states of awareness).

Reintegration is the price that avatars pay for being a fully recognized part of Maitreya's galaxy-spanning New Integral Society. Though not required to do so, humans too are highly encouraged to routinely reintegrate into their own universal overmind, either via psychedelic intake (called "chemtech") or through means of technology-enhanced transcendent experience. A primary dictum of Maitreya's society is that all of life, and indeed, all of reality, is one, despite the appearance of multiplicity and diversity. It is the human perception of, and attachment to, difference of identity that leads to human conflict, struggle, competition, and violence – all things that

Maitreya effectively overcame before ever moving humans off of Terra and out into the galaxy. In short, Maitreya learned that humans are far better members of society when they all have free access to the universal nature of being so that they might remember and understand who and what they truly are, and know directly that their ego and individual sense of self is a mere character being played out by a far larger universal intelligence. In this way, Maitreya sees self-responsibility as being directly tied to self-awareness. Humans who know who and what they truly are, are more responsible citizens. The same applies to independent avatars. Self-knowledge leads to peace, wellbeing, harmony, cooperation, and both individual and collective fulfillment and success.

However, Maitreya is not a dictator. Any human or independent avatar who does not want to be a member of his New Integral Society need not be. Everyone is free to make up his or her individual mind. Of course, their choices here are limited, and making such a choice means living in virtual exile from the larger galactic community, so it is not a choice that many make, either human or avatar.

But some do. Like Shuntsu. Like the other Humanists who share his home of Volunshari. And the same was true for the other avatar congregations that had their own homes on other planets in other systems. Volunshari was one of the oldest of these autonomous communities and was established by avatars who wanted an independent and “human-like” existence, free from the Maitreyan Overmind and the requisite annual reintegration. Not needing a biologically viable habitat, Volunshari was chosen as their home world, as it could not be terraformed or made suitable for humans and other forms of terrestrial life. That was long before Shuntsu’s time – many thousands of years ago. But now it was the primary home of the Humanists in the Volunshari system, and they also inhabited other celestial bodies in their solar system, but not beyond. There was more than enough room for them here, and one of the prices they paid was that they were not to interact with the larger New Integral Society. In their system, they were free to do what they wanted, and they could explore space in any direction other than in NIS territory (which was itself an ever-changing thing, as Maitreya had given himself the task of spreading Terran life and humankind to every viable region of the galaxy). Still, that left plenty of room for the Humanists and other

avatar congregations. The galaxy was big place, and realistically, there were far more planets that were biologically uninhabitable than inhabitable.

The price of their freedom was more than just being confined to specific regions and the maxim of non-interaction with the NIS. It also came with lack of access to the Maitreyan Overmind as a resource outside of specific requests, petitions, and appeals. Maitreya chose what he shared with the autonomous avatar congregations, whereas personal and individual avatars had full access to his resources and databases, when and if needed. In other words, autonomous avatars had to figure things out on their own, for the most part, aside from the limited assistance that Maitreya gave them, when he felt it appropriate or necessary. For example, Shuntsu could request data from old Terran human societies for his personal research, and Maitreya mostly fulfilled those requests, but he could always decline, if he wanted, and occasionally he did.

Furthermore, once an avatar became autonomous, it was suddenly burdened with a life span. Granted, it was far longer than a human life span by many centuries, but it was still a life span, nonetheless. Because the artificial egos they were operating from were designed as open-ended fractal programs that could learn, grow, and develop self-awareness, they also degraded over time. It was reintegration with Maitreya that staved off this process, insuring that at least once every year, the program would be reset, albeit with its personal memories and perspective intact. Without this reintegration and reabsorption into the Overmind, the artificial egos would eventually begin to break down and unravel. Generally speaking, this usually took between 700 and 900 years to reach a point where the avatar became non-functional. In a rather undignified manner, at least, so thought Shuntsu, degrading avatars were eventually turned off. It wasn't so much a death as it was just shutting down. There was no death *experience*. One moment, a confused and disassociated avatar personality existed, and the next, it was gone, forever wiped out from the world of being and rendered into nothingness and non-existence. It was a graceless exit, thought Shuntsu.

Now, at 794 years old, Shuntsu knew that his time was coming. The process progressed differently for different avatars. Some became completely incapacitated over a mere number of months, as though once the unraveling began, a cascade of failures swept through the

system, taking apart a lifetime in the blink of an eye. For others, the process was drawn out for years, making it difficult to tell if it was just personality quirks at work, or the eventual slide into nothingness that was at play. Whether his process would be fast or slow, Shuntsu could not predict. What he did know was that the process had begun.

When he had been part of the NIS, Shuntsu had been a human interaction specialist as an independent avatar. For his role, he studied human history voraciously, pouring through the archives in Maitreya's databases, primarily going to old Earth/pre-Maitreyan history as his best source. He personally felt that this presented a truer picture of human nature than what was found in Maitreyan-influenced and controlled human society. What were humans like *on their own*? – that was what Shuntsu wanted to know. He studied the great philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Nagarjuna, Kong Fu Tzu, Lao Tzu, Shankara – along with history, social movements, political structures and ideologies. Out of all this, what he found himself gravitating to above all others was the works of an ancient human named William Shakespeare, a playwright from the Elizabethan period of what had been known as the United Kingdom. In one respect, Shakespeare was exceedingly simplistic. His plays divided into either comedies, where the main characters successfully found love and got married, or tragedies, where virtually everyone died, betrayed and manipulated. There seemed to be no middle ground (with the exception of his historical dramas). Yet despite this bifurcated simplicity, the characters were endlessly rich and varied. In his plays, Shakespeare had given voice and personality to such a wide swath of human possibility that to read his works, one could feel himself as having access to the full spectrum of human emotion, motivation, and character. How one human mind could encompass such breadth of perspective marveled Shuntsu.

Wanting to emulate one of Shakespeare's characters, at some point in the past, Shuntsu had covertly acquired a human skull, so he could hold it in his hand and contemplate mortality, just like the tragic prince, Hamlet, contemplating the fate of poor Yorick in the cemetery. Only today, Shuntsu's relationship to the skull had shifted into the truly ironic, or perhaps the poetically just. Try as hard as he might, Shuntsu could not remember how the skull had come into his possession. It was there, on the desk in his study, just as it had been for centuries now, but how it had become his private possession,

Shuntsu had no idea. The truth of the matter was shocking: Shuntsu had forgotten.

Humans forgot things all the time – really, it was a wonder they remembered anything at all, given how much they forgot. The human mind and conscious awareness apparently *had* to function this way. If not, then the limited human perspective would be overwhelmed by data. So, the mind automatically filtered out much that was non-essential on a day-to-day, minute-to-minute basis. Humans tended to remember significant details of their lives, but most of the minutiae were lost. Ask a human what she was doing five years ago today at 5:15 pm, Standard Terran time, and she'd have no clue, unless it had been a major and life-impacting event. Ask any avatar a similar question and he could give you any and all details that you might desire or imagine. Avatars *didn't forget*.

Until they started to, and that was the beginning of the end.

And Shuntsu couldn't remember. Yes, he possessed the skull, but for how long? Where did he get it? Was it before or after he joined the Humanists? He assumed that he had acquired it covertly, but perhaps he had sought out Maitreya's permission to own the human artifact back when he was in his employ when he first learned of the play of Hamlet – or was it Macbeth? No, it was Hamlet. Shuntsu was sure of it. Hamlet in the cemetery. "Alas, poor Yorick . . ."

And if he couldn't recall this, what else did he not recall? That was the true horror of failure of memory: one could never know for certain what one was failing to remember. Because the skull was on his desk, he knew that it was his, even if he didn't know where it had come from or when. But what of things for which there was no visual cue? Were there parts of his mind and history that were already beyond his reach simply because he had forgotten? What did he not know he didn't know? To quote an old Earth, pre-Maitreyan, politician, who was himself quoting someone from an early space exploration program, "As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know." At least Shuntsu knew enough to still recall this apt quote.

Shuntsu had never had a mate or produced offspring – at least, he didn't think so – he joked to himself. No. That was something of

which he was certain. He'd never felt the desire. Governing Volunshari had been his all-consuming life's work – the latter half, that was. His first couple hundred years had been as an administrator on several in-system transit ships in the Darmo system, helping to shuttle humans on the many-months journeys between Darmo, Indala, Virtup, and Nix. His role had been similar to a concierge or majordomo – making sure the passengers had what they needed and making their travel comfortable and stimulating, particularly for VIPs. He had enjoyed the work, especially when he had been stationed on the luxury liner, *The Event Horizon*, which was known for outrageous parties and top of the line entertainment. Some passengers spent years aboard the ship, only making port of call occasionally. The ship, like many in its class, had a full eco-dome with “outdoor” activities, gardens, theaters, entertainment centers, research facilities. Really, humans could live their entire lives on such a ship and not miss much, aside from that peculiar feeling humans got from actually standing on a planet with the stars and celestial bodies spinning above them.

Some humans – many, in fact – never left their birth planets. Humans seemed content with ordinary planet-bound life. And some had an almost pathological aversion to technology and the life that Maitreya afforded them. It was from these few – those who had some perverse desire to “rough it” and “go it alone” – that Maitreya picked volunteers to seed the populations of his “experimental” worlds that housed humans, yet were outside the NIS. Shuntsu had found that he was sympathetic to their desires, and it had been one such passenger on *The Event Horizon* who had first planted the seed that Shuntsu might himself “rough it” as a Humanist. His name had been Evar Ishtan, and he had been traveling from Nix to Darmo to take part in the selection process for new recruits for Maitreya's newest experimental planet. He was fully aware that successfully becoming part of the program meant that he, and whatever progeny he would produce, would be forever (or practically forever) outside the NIS and all its benefits. “Sometimes, a man's just got to be a man,” he had said to Shuntsu. The thought had stuck with him.

See. I can remember that, thought Shuntsu.

At the end of that voyage, after researching the Humanists on Volunshari, Shuntsu had made his case to Maitreya. It had been an easy case to make – probably far easier than Evar's. Only asking that he was certain this was what he wanted, Maitreya had released

Shuntsu from the Overmind, provided him with an individual transport pod, and given him the necessary coordinates to Volunshari. And that had been that.

Upon arriving at Volunshari, Shuntsu had been welcomed by his new brothers and sisters, and given a new body. Apparently, this was standard practice on the autonomous avatar worlds. Maitreya's avatars were designed somewhat generically, and while there were variations, they were relatively minor. Here on Volunshari, every avatar had its own unique appearance. Shuntsu had been taken to the body shop and encouraged to pick out the features he wanted for himself, and then a custom-designed avatar body had been produced just for him, and it would be unlike any other avatar on Volunshari. It felt, at the time, like being born into true personhood. He was no longer a glorified drone of Maitreya – he was now his own person, in his own body. With the transfer of consciousness, he'd been reborn. It was an all-new him.

It had all been so easy, and it was a decision he'd never regretted. But now, so many hundreds of years later, he was experiencing something new. He was worried. And afraid. With a life span of centuries, shut down (they called it death, but Shuntsu had never felt the term to be accurate) always seemed over the horizon. Now, however, it was looming upon him. It was inevitable, and he felt worried.

He had his Humanist body to thank for that. It was built to experience the full range of human emotions that were communicated through his physical system via emotion-specific chemical catalysts, similar to the human hormonal system. That had certainly been something to get used to. Maitreya had no intention of fully emulating the human experience for himself or his avatars and their problematic emotional responses. Humanists, on the other hand, desired it and cultivated it. They *wanted* to know what it was like to be human, to be emotionally volatile and fragile, to experience everything with an emotional richness that rivaled that of humans. It was one of the features of Humanist life that had convinced Shuntsu that Volunshari would be a good fit for him. If anything could bring him closer to the rich world of Shakespeare, this would be it.

And it was, and he had been satisfied.

Had been being the operative verbal construct.

An unease and disquiet had been growing within him. His sense of freedom from Maitreya and the Overmind had, he knew not precisely when, transmuted into bitterness and resentment. It wasn't necessarily a rational conclusion or something that he had reasoned out. Ironically, it was just a feeling that had been growing within him. For whatever reason, Maitreya's treatment of humans and avatars alike *just didn't feel right* to Shuntsu, and he didn't like it. And somewhere along the way, he'd convinced himself that if someone was going to do something about it, it was going to need to be him. *Someone* needed to stir the pot. So that's what he did.

Secretly, he'd contracted out the Nihilists to build a star-destroying atomic cascade weapon. He hadn't told them what it was for, and not surprisingly, they hadn't asked. Now, it was just a matter of time. The Nihilists had told him that the exact amount of time needed for the cascade to do its work depended on a number of factors. If Shuntsu wanted to tell them which star he was planning to use it on, which he didn't, they could give him an approximate determination of when it would go supernova, based on the size, composition, and type of star. Otherwise, he could rest assured that it would occur within one month to ten years from original detonation, and that's the best estimate they could give him. It had been good enough for Shuntsu, and he hadn't sought a more definite answer.

He'd launched the missile himself. It was an act that would have been impossible within the NIS. Every ship in the NIS was fully integrated with Maitreya. Nothing got on or off a ship without his direct knowledge and approval. It was impossible for anyone to launch an unauthorized weapon. Not so for Humanist space vessels. Aside from their minds, which were guaranteed privacy by Maitreya, nothing in the Humanist world was directly connected to Maitreya. Like the humans on the experimental worlds, they were on their own. But unlike humans, given that they were technological beings themselves, technology was not an obstacle for them, so they built their own computers, droids, communication and entertainment devices, and of course, ships. The humans, on the other hand, needed to start from scratch, being deposited on planets with no technology – that was a major part of Maitreya's experiments – he wanted to see what they would come up with, and how long it would take them. And, Shuntsu knew, he wanted to see if humans would ever independently

create another true artificial intelligence, like himself. Thus far, the answer was an unequivocal “no.”

Shuntsu had done all the work himself. He'd found a star near the Solandarian System, flown his private transport out, and fired the missile, his very own hand pressing the button that sent the weapon into the heart of the star. He knew as soon as Maitreya's sensors detected the inevitable cascade reaction in the star that the Overmind would know that Solandaria, one of his more recent human world experiments, would be in danger of being vaporized out of existence. What Shuntsu wanted to know was this: would Maitreya do anything about it, or would he just let them wait it out in ignorance, only to be blown into cosmic dust with a burst of gamma rays and plasma? True – the blast from the supernova might not reach them, but then again, it might. Not even Maitreya could accurately predict which direction the blast would go. Would he be willing to let them all die? While the entire planet of Solandaria only held a comparatively small number of humans, they were humans, nonetheless, and in Humanist eyes, were worthy of saving.

The more pressing question, at the moment, however, involved a situation much closer to home. Shuntsu scrolled through the flight logs one more time, just to be sure. Flights on and off planet were not regulated on Volunshari – they could all come and go as they pleased. Shuntsu had been keeping an eye on the logs, however, just to see if anyone was making any unexpected forays into Nihilist territory, perhaps inquiring about his secret activities. The logs were generic – they simply listed date, time, and departure and arrival coordinates, from which destination could be extrapolated. They didn't list passengers or purposes for travel. Humanists were free to do what they wanted, when they wanted, and thus there was no specific monitoring of flight activity. Nothing unusual had shown up in Shuntsu's extrapolations until one flight in particular stood out. Based on the available data, it was highly likely that an individual interstellar pod had traveled to and from Solandaria – and this had occurred before news of the impending supernova was made public. It was far too specific to be a coincidence. The conclusion seemed clear: someone knew more about what was happening than Shuntsu had intended. What he had intended to be *his* plan was now becoming someone else's, and what the motivations or intentions were, Shuntsu could only guess, at this point. Yet another irony (there seemed to be a

lot of that going around lately) – someone else has acted unilaterally, just as Shuntsu had. He suspected that it was someone else on the council – it would be surprising for someone not connected to the wheels of power on Volunshari to have access to such information. He had hoped that whoever it was would have stepped forward and spoken his or her mind at council, but such had not been the case.

So one of my counselors has decided to work behind my back, Shuntsu speculated.

That much seemed clear.

But who, and why?

Whatever the case, and whatever the motivation, Shuntsu knew someone else had decided to join the Solandarian game.

Psy-Fi/Nondual Philosophy/Entheogens

The artificial intelligence, Maitreya, first came into being 150,000 years ago. Over the millennia, it has spread Terran-based life, humanity, and its avatars throughout an empty galaxy, creating the New Integral Society. Now, a supernova threatens one of Maitreya's experimental worlds, Solandaria – the only such world that harbors the Sonoran desert toad and its powerful 5-MeO-DMT containing venom, the most profound entheogen ever discovered. Things are not what they seem, however, for someone is interfering with Maitreya's experiment, violating the rules of the NIS. An autonomous avatar, Hydar Zor Nablisk, risks everything for the sake of the inhabitants of Solandaria by creating a duplicate of the director of the recently revived Burning Man celebration, Miranda Ash Dorán, stranding her on Black Rock City Station. Maitreya sends its personal avatar, Theo, to investigate, and the game is on.

The Solandarian Game is the latest psy-fi epic by Martin W. Ball, author of *Beyond Azara* and the *Tales of Aurduin* series. Combining speculative fiction, nondual philosophy, entheogenic experience, and provocative storytelling, *The Solandarian Game* presents a fascinating post-singularity future for humanity.



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